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What Does China Imagine?

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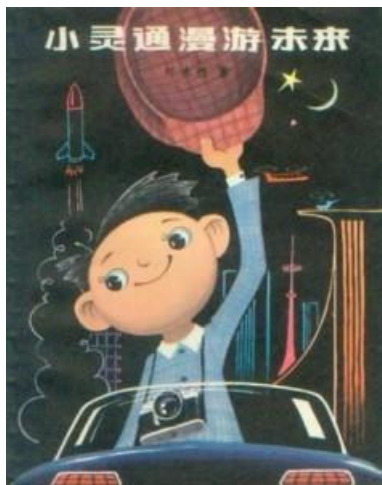
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By Guangyi Li

One day when I was four, I found an interesting book on the shelf, called *A Strange Patient*. This anthology starts with an impressive piece of science fiction, *Miracle on the World's Highest Peak* by Ye Yonglie. The story describes an investigation of Mount Everest, where, with some Tibetans' help, scientists find a precious dinosaur egg embedded in amber and preserved intact over time. Unlike their counterparts in *Jurassic Park*, however, the Chinese scientists don't extract dinosaur genes and clone this extinguished species. Instead, they hatch a baby dinosaur!



I have been a diehard science fiction fan since reading this story. Apart from some Jules Verne anthologies, *Science Fiction World*, the major sci-fi magazine of China, was my favorite reading material during my high school years. In the summer of 1999, its editors, as well as the large group of Chinese sci-fi fans, were ecstatic because all the participants in the national college entrance examination were required to compose an essay under the science fiction title "If Memory Can Be Transplanted". Having published a short story on a similar topic in its issue right before the exam, *Science Fiction World* celebrated this coincidence by claiming they "foresaw" the title, while conspiracy theorists believed that the magazine had been tipped off by those who composed the exam. At any rate the magazine gained a national reputation, and in a short time its circulation rocketed to 400,000. "The world's largest sci-fi magazine" remains a point of pride of Chinese science fiction through today.

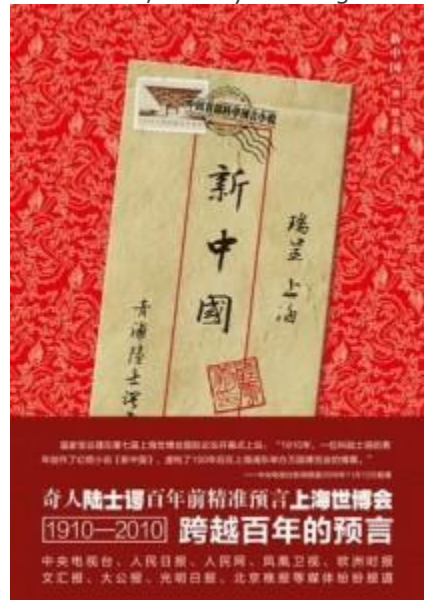


Social trends and world events have invigorated Chinese science fiction. The same thing happened to American sci fi: for instance, the Soviet-American competition of the Cold War had an impact on the genre's golden age. In China, the influence has always been clear

and direct. As early as the turn of the 20th century, there was an eruption of science fiction, as intellectuals hoped to spread scientific knowledge through this genre, which would ultimately serve the purpose of saving the country. A young Lu Xun, later the greatest writer of 20th century China, translated Jules Verne's *From the Earth to the Moon*, and wrote an unforgettable slogan in his preface, "Leading the Chinese people forward begins with science fiction!" (导中国人群以进行·必自科学小说始).

Seventy-five years later, science fiction underwent a second boom in the People's Republic, with another slogan "March towards Science," becoming well-known. Ye Yonglie, the author of *Miracle*, saw his new book, *Little Smart's Wandering in the Future*, become astoundingly popular all over the country in 1978 — along with its comic book version, it sold three million copies. After the chaotic, suffocating decade of the Cultural Revolution, Chinese people were eager to imagine what a splendid future they could enjoy.

Today's China has already seen the realization of the dreamlike future envisioned by late Qing science fiction writers. Last year, at the opening ceremony of the 7th World Expo International Forum, Premier Wen Jiabao mentioned a science fiction book, *New China*, in which the late Qing writer Lu Shi'e anticipated Shanghai's present-day World Expo a whole century ago. Likewise, many imagined urban constructions in the novel are now part of Shanghai landscape. What's more, their locations are much where the novel predicted! That said, "Today's Shanghai is far better than his dream," said Lu Shi'e's



grandson in an interview.

In the 21st century, Chinese science fiction authors and readers are not satisfied with the mere patriotism or nationalism in which their Qing predecessors were immersed. A case in point is Liu Cixin, currently the best sci-fi writer of China, who is finishing his successful *Three-body* trilogy, in which he shares with Stephen Hawking a worry about the catastrophic consequence of the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence (SETI) project. More and more, Chinese science fiction reveals popular concerns about the fast-transforming world, the fate of human beings, and, as one may expect, the role China will play in the future. Ambitions and anxieties, confidence and hesitance, all find their expression in this popular genre. Recently, Mark Leonard's *What Does China Think* became a hit among China observers. Considering the possibility of an upcoming "China's century," we may well address a similar, and no less important question:

What does China imagine?

Elizabeth A. Evans and SFW have also contributed to this article.

Guangyi Li is a PhD student of Asian Languages and Cultures at UCLA. He has founded an academic website, "[World Chinese-language Science Fiction Research Workshop](#)," in the hopes of creating a community for those who are interested in Chinese sci fi.

Editor's note: The day after this essay was published, we saw a post at [Danwei](#) that translates the essay questions students taking this year's college entrance exam had to answer. Coincidentally, the 2010 Hubei Province question references some of the topics Guangyi Li mentions in his article above. Here is the essay question, as translated by Danwei:

Fantasy (幻想) — "Sun Wukong somersault cloud and Nezha's Wind Fire Wheels are products of fantasy bearing humanity's dream to fly through the air. Who would have thought that the Fair of 10,000 Nations in Shanghai's Lujiazui district, described in the late-Qing fantasy novel New China, and the journey "From the Earth to the Moon" dreamt up by French science fiction novelist Jules Verne would become reality today? Fantasy arises from the human instinct to seek out knowledge and is an expression of humanity's uncommon imagination. Fantasy motivates reality, fantasy illuminates life, fantasy is the source of happiness..."

Tags: [science fiction](#)